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Thurstan Shaw on the Early History of the World Archaeological Congress (WAC)

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The first meeting of the World Archaeological Congress occurred in Southampton, U. K. from September 1–6, 1986. This Congress was originally conceived as the XIth meeting of the International Union of Pre- and Protohistoric Sciences (IUPPS). However, in September and October 1985, the British Executive Committee responsible for staging the Congress decided to ban South African and Namibian participation. Although this move was made in accordance with the recommendation of the United Nations Special Committee Against *Apartheid*, it nevertheless resulted in a contentious, bitter dispute in which many British and most American academics argued that the academic freedom of the South African delegates should not be unfairly sacrificed for political reasons. Amidst this divisive debate, the IUPPS and other funding organisations withdrew financial and moral support from the upcoming Congress. Peter Ucko, the National Secretary in charge of arrangements for the Southampton Congress, decided, with several others, to proceed.

In the following excerpt from his unpublished and unfinished memoirs, the Africanist, Thurstan Shaw, briefly describes his personal experiences as he lived through this change.

“By 1985, I had completed the Iwo Eleru Report and it was in the pipe-line for publication as the first monograph in *West African Journal of Archaeology's* new series and I had handed over to David Aiyedun all my Wushishi material so that publication remained his responsibility. Thus I had done all that I needed to do to fulfill my obligations towards my excavations and field-work; I could die with a good conscience. I would now be *really* retired and not do anything more actively in archaeology.

How wrong I was to be; I was dragged out of retirement by a number of offers. One of those came from Peter Ucko who rang up and started talking about the forthcoming UISPP Congress, to take place in Southampton in September 1986. Would I lend a hand in putting African archaeology on the world map at that Congress? This was a request difficult to refuse. Would I organise the African archaeology section together with Bassey Andah? Again difficult to refuse. And so it was to be.

At this time, *apartheid* was still practised in South Africa in the full rigour of its cruelty and showed no sign of crumbling; the issue arose, therefore, whether archaeologists from South Africa should be admitted to the Congress; UNESCO said that South Africans should be barred from all international cultural events.

I went to a big meeting at the British Museum attended by a large representative gathering of British archaeologists that split right down the middle on the issue. I spoke in support of the ban. The howls of rage from those supporting the admission of South Africans frequently invoked ‘academic freedom’ which their opponents were declared to be betraying.

I myself had become concerned about the issue of academic freedom. I had always accepted this as a value not to be questioned but when it was so frequently invoked in the debate, I felt that I should think more deeply. In November 2005, I therefore wrote a letter to the Editor of *The Times* in which I explained that there are few academics that do not espouse the cause of academic freedom of association and internationalism in scholarship. However, it is seldom that a moral ‘good’ is absolute and it was so in this case, where unequivocal support for more fundamental freedoms for the majority of the South African population, and the opportunity to give practical backing to that support, must have precedence over a moral principle, excellent in normal circumstances, but which must take second place in the face of the totally immoral principles enshrined at that time in the laws and constitution of South Africa. I felt that I had a right to speak on this since I had not only pursued a career in archaeology in Africa for forty years, with my first excavation in 1938 and my last in 1978, but also taught and lived along side African academic colleagues. It must be remembered that a decision to admit South Africans in the name of academic freedom would have been a decision to exclude a far greater number of scholars from a large number of other African countries because their governments would have withdrawn funding and even permission for their nationals to attend.

The matter came to a head in a meeting of the UISPP Council in Paris in January 1986. The story of this is told in great detail in Peter Ucko’s (1987) book, *Academic Freedom and Apartheid: The Story of the World Archaeological Congress*, but the net result was that UISPP recognition was withdrawn from the Southampton Congress and they did their best to see that it was a failure. It was the job of those who supported Peter Ucko in his stance to do our best to see that it was a success. There was an additional issue at stake, beside that of condemning *apartheid*. Peter had a concept of archaeology, and above all of what a genuinely *world* archaeological congress should be like, which was radically different from the Eurocentric attitude of the UISPP with its divisions of prehistory neatly sectioned into traditional periods.

The Africa section of the Southampton Congress was divided between African Prehistory, which Bassey and I were running and Iron-using Peoples of Africa, organised by John Alexander and Alex Okpoko. I was in a bit of a panic when there was no sign of Bassey ten minutes before we were due to

Peter Ucko, Alex Okpoko and Thurstan Shaw at Igbo-Ukwu, Nigeria, 1989. Professor Shaw is wearing the regalia of “Onuna-Ekwulu-Ora” of the Igbo-Ukwu, which translates as “the mouth that speaks on behalf” of the Igbo-Ukwu.



begin but he showed up just in time. I was also nervous about my paper which came first. In it I attacked the inappropriate application to African archaeology of archaeological terminology deriving from Europe. I was therefore particularly grateful to my former Cambridge student, Susan McIntosh, when she immediately jumped into the discussion, as soon as I had finished speaking, with general approval and with a comparison I had never thought of! She noted that it would have been a disaster for North American archaeology if archaeologists there had tried to force European terminology onto it.

At the final plenary session of the Southampton meeting, a new organisation was born, the World Archaeological Congress, and I served for a number of years on its Executive Committee.

At the UISPP congress in Mainz the next year there was a public debate on the issue of whether the Southampton congress had violated the sacred principle of academic freedom, with Peter and myself the chief speakers on one side, and, sadly, my old friend Jacques Nenquin on the other and another Africanist colleague, Philip Tobias speaking against me from the audience.

There remained the publication of the papers from the African Prehistory section of the Southampton congress which I had undertaken to be responsible for and to edit for the series of twenty volumes of post-congress papers that it had been envisaged the Congress would generate. From the start, Peter had been insistent that the congress should result in a series of books which would be of real scientific and scholarly value and he remained the dynamic general editor of the series.

One day Peter asked me for a name for the whole series. Something popped into my head. What about "One World Archaeology" I suggested. The name stuck.

It had been decided that the papers from the two African sections should be put together to form one book, and by November 1986 I had sufficiently bullied my contributors to have gathered all of their material together, but John Alexander had only managed to get four papers from his group. So Peter decided to bring in Paul Sinclair to help edit that section; we also decided to think in terms of producing a volume on African Archaeology, not merely reproducing the papers of the Southampton congress, but commissioning new articles and filling in gaps. That, of course, caused a delay in publication but I think the final result, *The Archaeology of Africa: Foods, Metals, and Towns* (1993) justified it. But it meant a very great deal of work over the next five years.

Through all the tribulations we suffered over the World Archaeological Congress, through all the battles and disappointments, through all the anxieties and grinding hard work, I received one inestimable gain: a friend in the person of Peter Ucko, for whom I grew to have an almost boundless admiration and affection."

Introducing T. C. Lethbridge

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I first became aware of the work of Thomas Charles Lethbridge (1901–1971) in 1986 after reading Colin Wilson's mighty tome *Mysteries* (1978). What initially began as a passing interest was further fuelled by my own discovery, two years later, of the prehistoric landscape around the village of Avebury in Wiltshire. This awakening sparked two decades of ongoing research and investigation into the mysteries of prehistoric Britain. It is a journey that has resulted in the visitation of well over a thousand ancient sites across both Britain and the Irish Republic. Throughout my enquiry, the pragmatic and imaginative approach of T. C. Lethbridge has always been at the forefront of my investigations.